APPROACHING AFRICAN TOURISM: PARADIGMS AND PARADOXES

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Travel will do you good by giving you knowledge of people, shapes of mountains, plains extending to unknown lengths, valleys with eternal waters trickling through, [but] you will not become better or more sensible. Seneca¹

Introduction

Tourism has old roots. At the start of the first millennium Seneca noted the urge of people to see foreign lands and strange landscapes, and, true to his vocation, he felt compelled to write his wry commentaries, serving as the first known elitist critique of the phenomenon. From the start the elite seem to have frowned upon the idea of traveling for fun; after all, the word ‘travel’ stems from ‘travail’, the verb work, so from a serious business. The oldest known European system of tourism was called pilgrimage, serious religious business if anything. Yet, already in that age the enjoyment of travel sometimes superseded religious motivations. In 1076 AD another early critic of tourism, Jacques de Vitry, wrote

Some light minded people go on pilgrimages not out of devotion but out of mere curiosity and love of novelty. All they want to do is to travel through unknown lands to investigate the absurd, often exaggerated, stories they have heard about the east (cited in Smith and Brent 2001: 4).

Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, one of the early masterpieces of European literature, is set in a pilgrimage setting itself,² and some characters, such as the wife of Bath, have been to all major pilgrimage centres in

¹ Roman philosopher and playwright, 4 BC–55 AD.
² To the grave of Thomas Becket, in Canterbury.
Europe, including Jerusalem. Pilgrimage is for forgiveness and holiness, but also for amusement. And the Tales surely are amusing.

After the pilgrimages—which still are an important stimulus for tourism even to this very day—the torch of tourism was carried by the Grand Tour, the essential education for an English gentleman of ample means in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in fact till the advent of the steam train. A trip through France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany and the Low countries was the ideal way of preparing for a life in diplomacy or studied leisure, but, of course, like most pilgrimages, it was only for the happy few who could afford it. Still, this kind of tourism also had its critics. The Grand Tour was said to re-enforce the old preconceptions and prejudices concerning national characteristics, as Jean Gailhard’s *Compleat Gentleman* (1678) observes: ‘French courteous. Spanish lordly. Italian amorous. German clownish.’

The first tour guides already appear in the late Middle Ages, with detailed information on what inns to frequent and what inn keepers to avoid. Travel gently developed from a necessity imposed by either religion or education, to an integral part of one’s social persona. Already the early pilgrim and, surely, the gentleman-at-leisure could ill afford not to undertake a pilgrimage or tour; the education of a gentleman was simply not advanced without exposure to the great works of ancient times and a thorough glimpse at the Renaissance of Southern Europe; and a wealthy catholic patron who had never been to one of the many holy sites, was lacking in faith or dedication, or too much interested in money.

Mass transport, from the 1820s onward with the coming of the steam train, changed the face of tourism from an elite to a common enterprise for all classes and walks of life, but some aspects of early tourism remained difficult to discard. One is the elite commentaries and critiques, on which I will return to, the other is the almost categorical imperative to travel, within North Atlantic societies. Limited to the happy few earlier in history, the imperative is felt, at this stage, by an array of different people. In the present, not traveling is hardly conceivable: who has been nowhere, who has not a travel story to tell? To borrow a term used for the study of backpackers: one has to have ‘road status’ if one has any status at all. After each summer the first conversation turns to the holiday, with as a characteristic first question: ‘Where have you been?’ ‘Home’ is not an easy answer to give; at least it calls for excuses and clarification, with about the